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‘Useful’ outcomes for workers in trade union learning initiatives. The significance of attitude and ownership.

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Abstract

The paper draws upon evidence from trade union learning initiatives that are funded by the Union Learning Fund or involve Union Learning Representatives in the UK. With reference to Chartist, radical and more broadly societal views of learning, analysis of learning topics, contexts and uses provides the basis for an understanding of ‘useful’ learning, around the themes of *attitude* and *ownership*. Whilst recognising limitations of trade union learning, it is suggested that these initiatives contribute to radical outcomes individually and collectively, arising directly and indirectly from the learning activities. This suggests the potential for outcomes which hark back to earlier understandings of the purpose of trade union education and worker emancipation. The part this may play in the readjustment of the balance of power between labour and capital and in enabling the development of a more inclusive and high skill society, is considered. The paper also recognises the methodological challenge facing those researching in the field.

Introduction. ‘Usefulness’ as a way of penetrating the ‘lifelong learning’ façade.

The UK policy of ‘lifelong learning’ now appears well established, reinforced by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) skills strategy (DfES, 2003a) and White Paper (DfES, 2005). The latter emphasises the role of skills in helping “businesses become more productive and profitable (and helping) individuals achieve their ambitions for themselves, their families and their communities” (DfES, 2005, p.5). Lifelong learning may thus been seen as the panacea for the UK’s ‘low-skill equilibrium’ (Finegold and Soskice, 1988), as it aims to achieve an inclusive and high

skill society (Keep and Mayhew, 1999; Lloyd and Payne, 2002) through skill development linked to economic growth (DfES, 2003a).

The trade union role is now incorporated in this policy. Whilst trade unions have a long history of educating their members, particularly in relation to union activities (Rainbird, 2000), this has been broadened since 1998 with part of the public funding for learning and skills development being accessed only by trade unions, through the Union Learning Fund (ULF). Funding increased from £2m in 1997 to £14m in 2004 (Clarke, 2004) and under the scheme 190 union learning centres had been established by 2004 (The Learning Rep, 2004a). National learning and skills policy also supports Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) which are funded partly by the ULF. ULRs were appointed from 1998 on a voluntary basis and in the 2002 Employment Relations Act were given statutory recognition for time off to support their activities of advising and providing learning support to workplace colleagues (Calveley et al, 2003; CIPD, 2004). 7000 ULRs were appointed by 2004 (a figure that is due to rise to 22,000 by 2010) and in the year 2003/04 ULRs involved 25,000 workers in “some form of workplace learning” (TUC, 2004a).

Support for such union learning activities is based on evidence that union members are more likely to receive training than non-union members. According to the TUC (TUC, 2002; TUC, 2004b), 39% of union members take part in job-related training in a three month period, compared to 26% of employees who are not union members. ULRs are seen as trusted union colleagues, are supposed to be able to advise and encourage learning, to deal with structural and organisational barriers to learning, and to contribute to raising ‘bottom up’ demand for learning (CIPD, 2004). They should be especially effective in redressing the inequality in learning opportunity – to involve workers in lower-grade jobs, and ‘non-traditional learners’, who may have been ‘turned off’ by formal learning (CIPD, 2004).

In reading reports of trade union learning initiatives one obtains a strong perception of a ‘lifelong learning’ approach....commonly shared by government, trade unions and employers (Rainbird, 2000), where such policy initiatives are adopted by all parties unproblematically and where all learning outcomes are inherently ‘good’, to the benefit of all. This unitarist impression is reinforced by the Labour government’s

rhetoric that directs many of these initiatives at the low skilled and disadvantaged, so that they “make a real difference to the lives of working people” (Clarke, 2004). Such rhetoric is paralleled by that from the trade unions. “Unions are using their unique role in the workplace to raise the skills levels of UK workers so that businesses can better compete in the global economy” (Brendan Barber, TUC General Secretary) (TUC, 2004b). Barber also asserts that the massive popularity of lifelong learning has proved that economic development can benefit working people. “The learning agenda has proved that economic progress and social justice are two sides of the same coin” (Barber, 2004).

Whilst the operational aspects of the ULR role have been documented (York Consulting, 2003; CIPD, 2004), academic attention has mainly centred on union organising and renewal outcomes (Munro and Rainbird, 2000; Rainbird, 2000; Calveley et al, 2003; Forrester, 2004). In terms of industrial relations agendas, trade unions may seek upskilling so as to increase the earnings potential of their members and to increase membership and activism (Rainbird, 2000; Calveley et al, 2003). Indeed, there is some evidence on activism, with 28 percent of ULRs being new to union activities and 59 per cent of these being women who have never before been active in a union (TUC, 2004c).

However, this paper focuses on territory that has been hitherto under-explored, namely the key issue of skill, and of the nature of the learning itself. In this respect it is important to recognise wider and long-lived involvement by trade unions in education. The trade union movement has historically campaigned for education for all, as a way out of poverty, for example through the Workers’ Education Association (WEA), Ruskin, and the Working Men’s College (TUC, 2004d). The 1970s saw an emphasis on activists’ training through trade union study centres, and through the 1980s and 1990s education has focused on tackling discrimination and on promoting equality (TUC, 2004d).

Such a background clearly suggests potential for trade union learning to be radically different from employers’ agendas. Indeed, trade union rhetoric clearly flags an intention to provide learning on workers’ terms which are not necessarily those of employers. Thus, “we have our own interest in skills training and acquiring

knowledge(where) no-one else should presume to know what's in our best interest. This is about real learning, learning from and guided by each other, not just by experts; learning what we want to learn, not just what we're meant to know; learning about what we're interested in and what's useful to us, not what passes for being clever in someone else's world" (USDAW, 1999). This raises important questions about the agendas that public-funded ULF initiatives are being used for, about the outcomes of learning, and particularly about what 'useful' means.

Key definitions of learning suggest a broad process of enquiry and reflection. Ranson and Stewart (1994) build on the work of Argyris and Schon and others in stating that learning is a process of discovery about why things are as they are and how they might become. However, a much narrower interpretation appears to prevail in mainstream policy debates, where useful learning is a question of effectiveness of learning in raising the appropriate types of skills in order to achieve economic growth. There is a prevailing and largely unquestioned assumption that all learning is inherently 'good'. However, critical views suggest that much learning has been associated with knowledge acquisition at a vocational level, is functionalist learning that has operated as social control, perpetuating the social pyramid between the ruling class and the various working classes (Ainley, 1999). In the workplace this control can be further understood through labour process analysis (Thompson and McHugh, 2002) where skill is seen as incorporated in work design so as to limit workers' task discretion. Few employers require upskilling or even reskilling or multi-skilling, asserts Ainley (1999), whilst most require deskilling. Where employers do provide training this is likely to have a behavioural and attitudinal emphasis rather than one that enables upskilling (Grugulis, et al, 2004; Lafer, 2004). Thus employers use skill as a control mechanism, seeking to act in a functionalist manner that can be defined as narrowly task or firm specific, thus providing an efficient, submissive and obedient workforce (Karabel and Halsey, 1977) through deskilling and work routinisation (Braverman, 1974). The focus on learning of such skills is markedly at odds with the reflective requirements of a learning society propounded by Ranson and Stewart (1994).

In this context critics argue that the UK strategy is failing as a low skill economy continues to predominate, with associated perpetuation of disadvantage (Ashton and

Felstead, 2001; Nolan, 2001; Taylor, 2003; Grugulis et al, 2004). It is argued that this failure is rooted in the institutional structures of the UK which have remained largely unchanged, with the market-driven approach encouraging minimalist and low-skill employer strategies (Streeck, 1992; Booth and Snower, 1996; Keep and Mayhew, 1996). Whilst the DfES skills strategy acknowledged the need to raise employers' demand for high skills (DfES, 2003a), the main policy emphasis remains one that seeks to raise skill levels by placing a responsibility on individuals to become more flexible and to develop higher level skills themselves (Rainbird, 2000).

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to discover more about how trade unions may be perpetuating or challenging this situation, in terms of the outcomes of the learning that they are supporting. In particular, what is needed is an analysis which considers the concept of 'usefulness' for learners. In addition to its practical use by trade unions (see the previous USDAW quote), the use of the term here stems from the tradition of 'really useful knowledge' originally expressed through the Chartist movement in the nineteenth century (Ainley, 1994). This was seen as learning for liberation; not just for understanding but to change the world for their (workers) own benefit. However, the benefits, like the uses, require further analysis.

Such benefits can be interpreted in terms of individuals' outcomes from learning, at the level of jobs and individual career and life chances. Thus, in terms of 'useful' this may mean learning for recreational purposes, for humanistic life enrichment outcomes. It may mean an ability to perform better in a job or work organisation and thus secure if not increase income and a standard of living. However, further and arguably more radical interpretations of learning are in terms of collective and class outcomes as Ainley (1994) suggests the Chartists meant. Alternatives to this interpretation would require an assessment of the extent to which union learning is assisting the provision of training on employers' and workers' agendas. In this respect, although Sutherland and Rainbird (2000) recognise that the workplace learning interests of unions' are not identical to those of employers, they avoid recognition of radically different outcomes. Indeed unions risk following employers' agendas (Streeck, 1992; Munro and Rainbird, 2002; Calveley et al, 2003) and there is already some evidence that this is the case. Whilst Heyes and Stuart (1998) find that trade union participation is associated with improved quality of training, this is

nevertheless training that is on the employer's agenda, such as coping with an increased workload.

Thus the paper seeks to extend understanding of 'useful' learning to be something more radical. One reading of this is the amount of control learning gives workers over their labour process, crucially, as recognised by Grugulis (2003a) and Grugulis et al (2004), discretion of decision-making and use of knowledge in job roles. An investigation here provides the opportunity to deepen understanding of the current policy of the 'learning age' where, as Ainley (1999) posits, 'learning' has been used to merge the concepts of knowledge and skill formation.

However, in a more structuralist sense 'radical' 'useful' learning enables, as Fox (1974) would see it, outcomes in terms of political and class activity that lead to revolutionary over-throw. Radical perspectives on education support this, recognising that education is not a neutral activity and that its purpose is action to cause social change (Elsey, 1986). One key aspect identified by the Chartists is of ownership, where learning takes place by doing and by discussing practical work and where the control of the whole learning process is by workers rather than by experts, in order to overcome the division between ruling and working class. Thus, there is collective self-realisation and transformation as knowledge is actively discovered by learners and teachers together (Ainley, 1994). This concept was further developed as Marxist 'polytechnic' education. Similarly, Elsey (1986) sees participant involvement and self determination as important features of radical approaches to education.

In the current political and economic context of the UK this is perhaps difficult to imagine, particularly when the rhetoric of the Labour government and the TUC are considered. Indeed almost any learning contextualised in the prevailing (structured) political economy, but particularly that based in any way in the workplace, may be seen as workers (and trade unions) manufacturing their own consent (Burawoy, 1979) through undertaking learning that is directly or indirectly to do with work, careers, 'employability' and 'citizenship'.

However, it is argued here that theoretical analysis of the usefulness of learning and its radical nature (or not) requires acknowledgement of social realism (Berger and

Luckmann, 1971) rather than taking outright modernist and poststructuralist perspectives. Learning may be ‘useful’ in a radical Marxist sense if it leads to recognition of structural inequality in the class relationship between capital and labour over the collective production of wealth and its private accumulation; and a strengthening of individual and collective resistance. An acknowledgement of worker agency (Thompson, 1989) leaves the door open to argue that learning which leads to incremental change rather than revolutionary over-throw may be just as ‘radical’ in this context.

The method draws upon evidence from studies of union learning and from analysis of policies and accounts of learning from a number of trade unions including GPMU, UNISON, AMICUS, UNIFI, CWU, ASLEF (and associated unions – RMT, TSSA, AMICUS – in ‘Rail Union Learning’), along with the TUC and the TUC’s Learning Services. Relevant websites and document sources are included in the reference list. The focus is on activities in ULF-funded learning centres and on the work of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs).

The analysis moves beyond a simple cataloguing of subjects learnt, although this is the starting point. Rather, it is informed by Elsey’s (1986) description of radical education which places emphasis on building self-confidence, critical analysis and a commitment to action. It seeks to explore these aspects by a broadening of analysis so as to take account of the learning environment, and the wider work and social environment of the learner, including family, political, community and class. In such an analysis, the outcomes in terms of the topic learnt are important, but so too are any emphases that are put on the topic and the uses to which the learning is then put. The outcomes may be influenced by inputs (such as the materials and methods used), the contexts (access, the trainers, the physical environment), and the outcomes themselves.

In analysing the manifestations of ‘usefulness’ outcomes need to be considered in individual and collective senses. At the job level learning may enable control over task discretion (rather than simply enabling multi-tasking). From labour process analysis, in terms of workers’ broader careers, both in and outside of particular organisations, a key issue is workers’ control (ie. their discretion) over their ability to

choose jobs and other forms of economic activity. In terms of life opportunities this can be fairly broad, including well-being and economic sufficiency, and also activities that may lead to some sense of contribution to social change – community and political awareness and activism, ultimately perhaps to more radical agendas. It is from such a more in-depth examination of the nature and outcomes of learners' skill and knowledge acquisition that an assessment of the real contribution of trade union learning initiatives for learner emancipation may be assessed.

The learning topics

Analysis of the various documents and reports of trade union learning reveals that many different topics are the subject of learning. Table 1 lists the topics as they are named and described explicitly in the reports. More covert and contextual purposes behind the learning are described in later sections of this paper. The lists here are indicative; no attempt is made here to quantify the number of times particular topics occur in the reports, although those at the top of the columns (basic skills and IT) are numerous, whilst others are reported more occasionally. Also in table 1 an attempt is made to organise the topics into the categories of work and non-work-related learning. However, in reality it is not possible to do this neatly. Many topics, such as IT skills and numeracy and literacy skills have applications directly to jobs and tasks within jobs, as well as to activities outside the workplace (see table 3). Nevertheless, in organising topics under work and non-work related headings, table 1 illustrates something of the diversity of learning topics included in trade union learning and begins the process of analysing how 'useful' the learning may be.

For work-related learning, the majority of topics are directly providing what employers regard as key transferable skills together with some specific task-functional skills. These include the basic skills necessary to communicate with and to work with others in the workplace. There are examples of company-specific training and training related to particular jobs and vocations. An example is the training for print workers managed by GPMU and Leeds College of Technology, including machine printing, print finishing, Mac skills, workflow and digital print (The Learning Rep, 2004a). "With vocational training a major issue in an industry (print) where too many companies plug their skills gaps by poaching from the competition, the centre has

been offering courses in industry standard software, including Adobe PhotoShop, Quark Xpress and Microsoft powerpoint”, outside of work time (TUC, 2004e).

Of course it can be argued that acquisition of task-functional skills may enable greater workers’ control of their labour process, by gaining promotion and thus being able to exercise more discretion in their work, and by increasing employability and changing

Table 1. Trade union learning initiatives: the topics of learning.

| Directly work-related | Not directly work-related |
|---|--|
| Basic skills (numeracy and literacy) | Basic skills & ‘Skills for Life’ (numeracy and literacy) |
| IT Introductory IT | Return to Learning (R2L) |
| Webwise | IT Digital photography |
| European Computer Driving Licence (= NVQ level 2) | Web page design |
| Health & Safety | Computer troubleshooting |
| Information Advice & Guidance (IAG) | Languages (Spanish, French) |
| Careers guidance | English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) |
| Communication at work | First aid |
| Interview skills | Learning to swim |
| Job training | Household finance |
| eg. HNC in Housing | Stress management |
| Job training (selected NVQ units only) | Fitness and nutrition |
| NVQ 2 Customer Service | Deaf awareness |
| LG Philips company’s own Sigma award for continuous improvement. | British sign language |
| Local authority: bricklaying, plastering, block paving, plumbing, joinery, electrical installation. | Making walking stick handles |
| | FA coaching to train a local youth team |
| | Bricklaying |
| | Garden design. |
| | GCSE / A level |
| | Law |
| | Studying for a degree |

employers, thus gaining more control over their labour process in a career sense. Both outcomes may also enable workers to bargain for higher pay and thus improve their quality of life. Arguably, however, much of this can be seen as public funding channelled through trade unions in order to replace training that should be provided by the industry. Seen from a radical perspective, this is training on employers’

functionalist agendas, likely to have limited outcomes for individual development and even more limited wider collective or class outcomes. As such, trade unions are complicit in employers' agendas here and risk losing credibility in terms of their independence.

Non-work related learning includes a wide variety of topics. Basic skills training is provided free to all who need it under the 'Skills for Life' banner and through the 'learnirect' network, with one way of delivering this being through ULF-funded projects. Ostensibly about a wider non-work related agenda, nevertheless this distinction is difficult to make as the government seeks to convince Chief Executives and Managing Directors of the business benefits that arise from improving literacy and numeracy at work (DfES, 2003b).

Other topics include IT, languages (Spanish, French), first aid, brickwork, garden design. Once again a straight reading of the topics reveals little about the labour process implications. Language training is cited as being both for pleasure and holiday use, and for business benefit in communicating with overseas work colleagues (The Learning Rep, 2004b). However, even these direct learning outcomes should be understood in the work context where their provision may be seen as attempts to engender employee commitment through an appeal to hearts and minds and, more instrumentally, through part of the benefits package.

The language theme extends to numerous cases of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) training. Examples include programmes for non-EU asylum-seekers and refugees in Lincolnshire agricultural and food and industry jobs (TUC, 2004e), for migrant Eastern European construction workers in a learning centre run by UCATT at Canary Wharf, London (TUC, 2004a), TGWU's United Workers Association, for training of migrant hospitality and domestic workers from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Africa, India and Malaysia (The Learning Rep, 2004b) and for Russian migrant workers through ULRs in Sainsburys. Trade unions' role in ESOL would appear rather peripheral to any interest they may have in strengthening workers' control over their labour process and one might question their involvement in such activities that may be seen to directly benefit employers and economic growth. However, a number of trade unions have explicit aims to promote the growth of the

international trade union movement (CWU, 2005). Of specific relevance to this paper is the impact that such initiatives have for migrant workers' control of their labour process, at the job level, but particularly at the level of career and life opportunity. As a ULR in the Sainsbury's case states, "you know you're making a difference to peoples' lives" (TUC, 2004e).

The learning contexts

A deeper insight can be gained through analysis of the contexts in which learning takes place, particularly issues of who trains and organises learning and sets access to it, together with the physical methods and locations of delivery and the wider social and political context.

A notable feature of trade union learning initiatives is their dependence on computers. The majority of learning typically takes place in a small room equipped with a number of PCs. Nevertheless, table 2 indicates the range of physical locations for this learning, ranging from situations where premises, computers and other equipment are provided by the employer, together with some time off for learning; through to those where learning takes place out of the workplace, including trade union-owned premises, and in the learners' own time.

Table 2. The contexts of trade union learning initiatives

| Physical | Social | Political |
|---|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| ULR – in the workplace | Employees (one employer) | Context of activism |
| Union learning centres – in the workplace | Employees (multiple employers) | Trade union organising |
| Union learning centres – on trade union premises | Family and friends | Trade union training |
| Partnerships involving other providers – colleges, Learndirect. | Retired workers | |
| The Union Academy. | Unemployed members | |
| Existing TU Education centres | Wider community | |
| Mobile – shopping centres, libraries | Open access | |
| | Other community groups | |

Examples of work-based learning centres, jointly-funded by employer and trade union (ULF) include LG Philips, Durham (Amicus); Hydro Aluminium Motorcast, Leeds (Amicus); Merseytravel (Amicus, GMB, TGWU, Ucat, Unison); Royal Mail (CWU); Pittards (TGWU); South West Trains (RUL); and Metroline Buses (TGWU) (The Learning Rep, 2004a and 2004b; SERTUC, 2004a; RUL, 2005). Further examples of jointly-run employer and union initiatives are Employee Development Funds to finance courses, in which employees can apply for various grants of up to £100 per year. Applications are made to a joint union/company committee and courses can be off site as well as on site, and include work and non-work-related subjects (SERTUC, 2002).

Examples of non-workplace-based learning centres/programmes include that run by Unifi in its own regional offices, although it has also persuaded some employers to allow staff to pursue their own learning programmes using company training facilities (The Learning Rep, 2004a). Recently, the first multi-union learning centre has been opened in the Trades Union Hall in Watford (TUC, 2004f). There are also partnerships with other training and education providers. Usdaw (North Yorkshire) runs programmes with colleges, a university and the Workers' Education Association (WEA) (The Learning Rep, 2004a); and a 'Return to learning' programme is run by UNISON also with the WEA (UNISON, 2005). The association with the broader educational aims of the WEA (which provides courses for more than 110,000 adults a year across 10,000 courses as diverse as cultural studies, art history, architecture, music and science) (WEA, 2004a & b), clearly should stimulate learning for personal interest and fulfilment, although the extent to which this enhances worker discretion and control over work as opposed to being purely recreational, requires further analysis.

As far as can be ascertained, access to learning centres and programmes is 'open' to any employees who can benefit from it, and very often involves a learning needs assessment diagnosis at the outset. In reality however, a major restriction is the lack of provision made in the Employment Relations Act (2002) for paid time off for employees to take part in such learning. Thus conference delegates tell of problems getting paid time off for learning, with resultant problems of access, support for carers of dependants, when learning is forced outside of working hours (SERTUC, 2002),

therefore often blocking access to those most in need. In addition, of course, there are also limitations for union learning centres and ULRs due to statutory support being limited only to workplaces where trade unions are recognised for bargaining purposes; and there being no right to bargaining on learning and skills matters.

There are a number of examples where access extends beyond employees and beyond the physical confines of workplaces. Retired workers can use the Pittards/TGWU learning centre (The Learning Rep, 2004 and 2004b); there is twenty four hour and seven day access for employees to the RUL/South West Trains centre at Waterloo station (RUL, 2005); and in the Metroline Buses/TGWU example, Metroline own the mobile learning centre, a double-deck bus, equipped with PCs, that provides mobile access to all garage depots, and for different shifts (SERTUC, 2004a). The GMB (Grantham Community Branch) take mobile learning centres to shopping centres and libraries (TUC, 2004e); and the example at Watford Trades Union Hall (TUC, 2004f) extends access to friends, family and the wider community who can walk in off the street. In this case, work is beginning to be coordinated with other local learning forum and with other community agencies and voluntary organisations. For example, the local branch of 'Relate', the relationship advisory charity, is training network seeking to use the union learning centre for counselling and life skills training.

Extending the analysis to consider a broader political context of activism, the role of the ULR would seem key here, as the first contact for many employee-learners and the person to direct learners to specific courses and learning environments. 26 per cent of ULRs report an increased interest in union membership as a result of their activity (York Consulting, 2003).

It is not the intention of this paper to focus on the more traditional trade union education and training programmes provided for reps. However, the extent to which new learners may be referred to study in, or physically alongside, other trade union education, is relevant here. Trade unions have their own education departments, colleges and tutors, and although the extent of radical rhetoric varies from union to union, they varyingly commit to open access, achieving potential for individuals, organising, understanding international development (and globalisation) (Aslef, 2005; Unifi, 2005; Unison, 2005); and "to promote workers' solidarity in the world, to

develop and strengthen free and democratic trade unions and encourage members to develop their own educational potential in order to better serve the trade union and labour movement.” (CWU, 2005). The trade union movement also appears intent on taking more ownership and making more cohesive its learning provision as a whole, through the TUC’s ‘Union Academy’ (TUC, 2004d; TUC, 2005)

In this context there are examples of ULRs directing workers to courses at Trade Union learning centres based in colleges (TU Studies Centre, Sheffield College; College of North East London; Trade Union Education Unit, Stockport College; TU Education department, Derby College; TU Studies Centre, Lewisham College). The Lewisham centre offers a wide range of courses to shop stewards, safety reps and learning reps as well as a range of union members (TUC, 2004e). Further, two workplace union learning centres report that they anticipate running ‘tutor-led courses’ as well as PC-based ones, and one of these plans to base the training in the room used for training union reps, next door to the PC-fitted union learning centre. These aspects tend to be reported to a more limited extent compared to other ULF activities, particularly compared to the straight reporting of topics, such that it often appears that task-functional and transferable skills delivered through PCs, predominate in union learning. If this were the case, such a learning emphasis would appear to mitigate against widespread radical outcomes at the present time. However, the reports of learning in a unionised context, in physical settings where learning takes place alongside other union representatives and trainers who are union activists, suggests potential to stimulate greater political and class awareness through learning. It is in these contexts that the dominant discourses of employability and conformance within social structures might be challenged in the future.

The uses of the learning

Attention now turns to an analysis of the range of uses to which the learning experiences are put (table 3). ‘Uses’ here are taken to include what may be seen as benefits, reasons and purposes given, and researcher interpretations. The stated uses are taken straight from a variety of documented sources, including those direct from learners, and the uses gained indirectly and stated by trade unions, employers and government. The second column offers researcher interpretations of these stated uses, beginning to understand these using broader and theoretical interpretations. Both

columns begin with job-level learning at the bottom and move up through career opportunities to broader outcomes in terms of life opportunities and class, political and community awareness.

In many respects, the outcomes from union learning may be seen to be optimising control on the agenda of employers and capital. At the level of job and employer, benefits are perceived particularly by employers. “There has been a marked increase in morale, staff have a more positive attitude, and turnover has been reduced” (Manager of Barking and Dagenham Council, *The Learning Rep*, 2004a, p.11). In the case of the INA Bearing Company, trade union learning is supported in the context of “response to increased competition from low-labour-cost countries.... a sustained attempt to upskill the workforce....the union involvement has been welcomed by management and personnel staff” (CIPD, 2004). The context of a contemporary capitalist industrial economy shapes the agendas of agencies involved around labour market demand and shortage. In one example, the London Development Agency (LDA) prioritises manufacturing and design; creative and cultural industries; tourism, hospitality and allied sectors (SERTUC, 2002), and seeks to harness trade union learning for this end. Such an analysis indicates a prevailing task-functionalist and market-driven context.

Another feature of union learning is the emphasis on transferable and functional skills and associated credentialism typically based on vocational qualification-based courses through government-sponsored programmes (see also Forrester, 2004), including NVQs, learndirect, and the European Computer Driving Licence. ‘Certified learning’ is seen to be a major benefit for the learners involved (CIPD, 2004). For example, learndirect programmes focus on diagnosis and testing of basic skills, through the use of national Adult Literacy and Numeracy Tests, awarding certificates that are the equivalent of key skills tests for communication and application of numbers at level 1 and level 2 (DfES, 2003b).

However, concerns about so-called ‘transferable skills’ are now well documented, with evidence suggesting they are only partially transferable and that they reinforce low-level multi-function work within organisations (Stevens, 1996; Ainley, 1999).

When linked to qualifications, the ‘transferable’ (and therefore liberating) rhetoric of credentialism appears stronger. Yet reports of trade union learning indicate that

Table 3. The uses of trade union learning initiatives

| Stated uses | Researcher interpretations |
|---|--|
| Involvement in local politics | Political awareness |
| Trade union activism | Class awareness |
| Expand personal horizons | Political activism |
| | Trade union activism |
| A successful economy | Broad generalised knowledge |
| Improved living standards | Emancipatory/humanist learning |
| More involvement in community life | Discretion over life opportunities |
| Social contact | Social betterment |
| Everyday life | Community awareness and activism |
| Not getting into debt | |
| Being streetwise | Recreational |
| Avoid being conned | |
| Understand their pension | |
| First aid and safety in the home | |
| Confidence | Confidence |
| Family outcomes | Family and individual outcomes |
| Keep up with the kids on the computer | |
| To enable parents to support the education of their children | |
| To read to their children | |
| Less suspicious of training | |
| Unafraid of new technology | Career discretion |
| Career choice | |
| Access to jobs / enhance job prospects | Transferable skills – or of limited transferability? |
| Training / retraining / qualification in the face of redundancy / factory closure | |
| Qualifications | Job security? Status? Promotion? |
| Equal opportunity in access | Equality of opportunity |
| | Transferable skills within the organisation |
| | Horizontal or vertical? |
| | Task discretion? – control over job? |
| Enhance business performance | Job satisfaction? |
| Fill skills gaps | Pay |
| Do job better | Functionalist job control |
| Do a job safely | |

employers 'cherry pick' only NVQ units they see as relevant to their job, whilst others will not accept NVQs that have been partially completed at a previous employer (SERTUC, 2004b). Further, the construction and use of these occupational qualifications have been criticised as being functionalist and reductionalist in nature, written by employers to reinforce a multi-functional but low discretion work environment, and enabling horizontal skill acquisition rather than vertical. Thus, rather than liberate they may constrain worker development, contribute to over-qualification and be potentially discriminatory (Stewart and Hamblin, 1992; Ainley, 1999; Grugulis, 2003b; Grugulis et al, 2004).

In embracing learning as consumption through vocational qualifications, the risk for trade unions is that they will perpetuate the skill and knowledge divide, reinforce a separation of learning delivery from control and further stigmatise those at the bottom end of the qualification structure, thus risking colluding with capital. This collusion is exacerbated by trade union learning structures playing the game of private sector capitalism by competing for and winning contracts, using the language of customers, within a context of a contractual state (Clarke and Newman, 1997) that has increasing presence. In so far as state-funding through ULF provision is aimed at basic skill needs across a variety of subjects, this could be seen as adding to and being in keeping with the traditional trade union education role. However, caution must be exercised here and trade unions might be wary of finding the ULF a convenient way of funding some of these existing activities. Funding can be for relatively short timescales and over-dependency on the ULF can bring uncertainty about the long term provision (Calveley et al, 2003). Such dependence on employer agendas leads one to question the extent to which ULF initiatives offer anything substantially new, 'useful' or indeed 'radical' or whether it is simply adding to and replacing existing organisational training.

On a more positive note, despite concerns about the focus on credentials, there are other outcomes which appear to bring benefit to the control that individuals can exercise over their quality of life. The Skills for Life programme attempts to make sure that the people who need to learn, the disadvantaged, gain most. Thus it seeks to

enable parents to help educate their children, so that future generations are not disadvantaged. It provides assistance for everyday life on such issues as not getting into debt, being streetwise, avoiding being conned, understand pensions (for those fortunate enough to have one), and to enhance first aid and safety in the home (SERTUC, 2004b).

Trade union learning appears to provide opportunities for workers to have greater control over their labour process at the broader level of career choice, so one respondent says “I was previously stuck in secretarial work and I was bored – but no longer” (UNISON, 2005). The previously-discussed ability of international migrants to benefit from such programmes is another example. Reports also highlight the liberating nature of affective outcomes such as self confidence. “It was excellent and abolished a lot of the negative feelings about learning that I left school with. I realised I wasn’t a dunce, that I had got a brain. It was a real confidence booster” (UNISON, 2005). “These courses have certainly inspired me. Apart from all the skills I learnt, which will help me to progress in my career, I have started doing some creative writing” (UNISON, 2005). These examples illustrate how workers’ discretion is enabled at the levels of career and life opportunities.

Conclusion. The significance of attitude and ownership in trade union learning.

One interpretation of the analysis here is that much union learning is not explicitly radical. This is particularly true in terms of subject content (although it is also true that some of topics are more inspirational than others). In work-related learning there is evidence of a prevailing task and employer vocational orientation. Where workers remain in their current workplace, skills acquisition is limited to the requirements of low-skilled and multi-skilled jobs, transferable skills that reinforce existing managerial organisational behaviours, and because of restricted access to enhanced pay and promotion opportunities. Thus, there would appear to be little opportunity for workers’ control over the immediate labour process. In addition, provision of a predominately PC-based learning environment and an embracing of an employer-led system of commodified credentialism suggest that trade unions risk being complicit in employers’ control agendas. Even provision of non work-related learning can be seen as enhancing employer control by gaining workers’ commitment to the organisation. As discussed, there are also other practical limitations on union learning, including

limited statutory rights on training, and practical difficulties in organising and gaining time off for learning.

Undoubtedly there are more liberating interpretations. Transferable skills can provide some worker control over career and life opportunities as learners change employer, increase their earnings potential and life opportunities. Whilst the evidence of individual personal fulfilment is scant, work-related but particularly non work-related learning clearly has some outcomes in this regard. However, a focus on skills and topics leads to a rather limited analysis and to an assessment of prevailing employer control, and it is this focus that characterises most direct reports of trade union learning initiatives.

In addressing this limitation, what is required is an analysis that considers the broader context in which the learning takes place and the purposes for which it might be used. In addition, this analysis recognises the complexity of the outcomes of union learning in two respects. Firstly, the outcomes can be not only individual but also collective. Secondly, that the direct learning outcomes such as skill acquisition can be differentiated from outcomes that are not directly related to the learning. Further, these dimensions are not mutually exclusive but may exist together. Thus direct outcomes of learning for an individual may be employer task-specific, but indirect collective outcomes may be union organising and renewal. The acknowledgement of this complexity leaves room for interpretation of more radical outcomes and forms the basis for a further conceptualisation of what ‘useful’ learning means in this current context. The two aspects of this analysis are *attitude* and *ownership*, together with the relationship between them.

Ownership is an important part of the Chartist-informed worker-controlled agenda (Else, 1986; Ainley, 1994). Analysis here shows that this ownership can be individual and collective, and in the design of the learning as well as its delivery and receipt. Granted, employers are involved in the physical provision of many examples, and exert control over qualification structures. Nevertheless, learners show a willingness to undertake shared learning, with a collective spirit, “doing something for ourselves” (SERTUC, 2004b). The independent status of trade unions, and the fact that access to learning and learning advice is via a source other than representatives of

management, often through Union Learning Representatives, gives two obvious benefits. Firstly, openness and equality of opportunity in raising awareness of learning opportunities and for accessing learning itself. Secondly, the proximity to those who are union and political activists. Physical location would also appear to be important here, as examples have indicated, providing an ownership context that is not to do with employers' agendas. The location of ULF initiatives next to continuing trade union education policy on broader issues about the labour movement, the offering of union bursaries, and access to (academic) education as well as vocational, provides opportunities to develop generalised knowledge and understanding of societal and political issues.

The attitude with which learners become involved in union learning also resonates with the ownership theme. Overwhelmingly, learners become involved in trade union learning initiatives in order to better themselves. Further, the sheer benefit of outcomes to individuals in terms of their attitude to life and access to increased life opportunities would appear to hold great potential for workers. One of the most frequently quoted benefits cited by learners is increased confidence. This can be related to the immediate work situation, but there are also many examples of opportunities to progress out of disadvantage, to give future generations a sense of a better chance (for example through the Basic Skills programmes) and earnings opportunities (ESOL for migrant workers). Such self confidence and commitment to action, relate strongly to Elsey's (1986) radical views on education.

Thus it is argued that rather than concentrate on the specific topics of learning, a better understanding of the 'usefulness' of learning can be derived from analysis of the context and purpose, and the part that *attitude* and *ownership* play in the learning process. Indeed it is suggested here that the *attitude* with which the topic is learnt is at least as relevant as the topic itself.

The challenge for those involved in the practice of trade union learning is to achieve the potential that the policy suggests. On the basis of the evidence examined here, in order to do this it will be important to strengthen delivery through student and tutor-led discussion, operate in physical environments that are controlled by the union and workers, and emphasise broader educational provision both in physical location and in

defining learning aims. This strengthening should aim, in Elsey's (1986) terms, to incorporate critical analysis as well as continue building self confidence and commitment to action. The ability of the newly-announced Union Academy to commission learning programmes would seem key here. As Forrester (2004) suggested, there is also potential to develop community-based work with other local learning forum, community agencies and voluntary organisations. Union learning can increasingly include non-workers and workers other than direct employees, with the potential to extend the power of an 'attitude' associated with the labour movement to a diverse range of groups in society.

Clearly there are practical limitations for many of the union learning initiatives at present. In principle unions and workers will be aware of the risk of becoming subsumed in an all-embracing mainstream rhetoric that emphasises tripartite consensus on this matter and in particular will be wary of supporting employers' training and of an over-dependence on vocational qualifications to the extent that it may be seen to jeopardise the independence of trade unions.

Overall however, there is an optimistic analysis here for both work-based learning and wider societal outcomes. For the former, it is suggested that trade union learning can find useful ground in raising demand and expectations from workers of high skill work, and high-discretion work, which may go some way towards eroding the UK's employer-controlled low-skill equilibrium. For the latter, potential outcomes include political and class awareness, political activism, trade union activism, community awareness and activism, family and individual outcomes (such as confidence and assertiveness) which may lead to a readjustment of the balance of power between labour and capital and enable the development of a more inclusive and high skill society. These suggest the potential for radical outcomes which hark back to earlier understandings of the purpose of trade union education and worker emancipation.

The challenge for those researching in the field is largely methodological. Firstly, to recognise the cross-disciplinary nature of the field, where more recent areas of interest in IT-based distance learning, geography and community unionism can be combined with the more traditional interests in industrial relations, training skills and education. Secondly, what is required is to get behind the façade of unproblematic reporting of

topics and frequencies of learning activities that typifies so many of the reports and accounts produced by and for government and trade unions, and in doing so to better understand the nature of union learning, much of which does have multiple interpretations. This means engaging with learners and other actors involved in the delivery of union learning on the ground.

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